

Integrated Programs: Curriculum or Pedagogy?

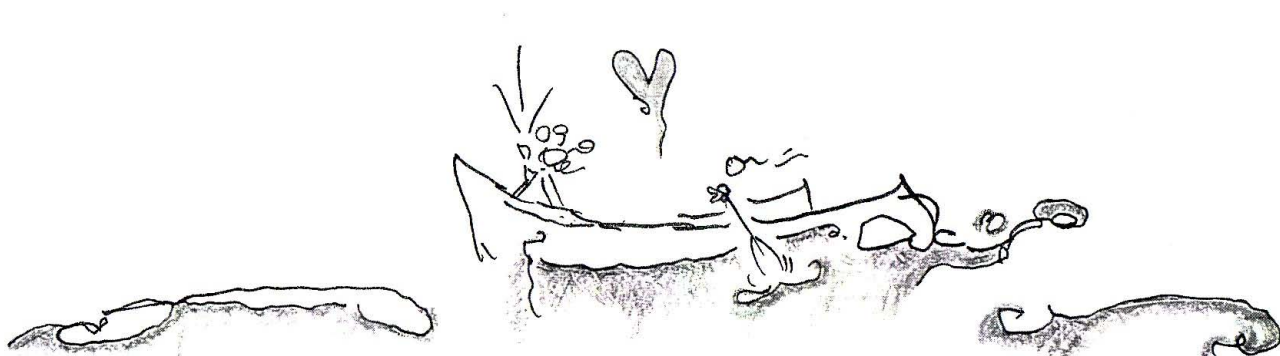
By Michael Bowdridge

Over the years, the relationship between outdoor education and public schools has been a rocky one, and as a result it can be argued that outdoor education has never gained a significant foothold in the Canadian educational system. With outdoor education providing such an effective learning environment, this naturally begs the question: What has prevented a greater degree of inclusion of outdoor education in our public school system? Though some believe that a potential incompatibility exists between outdoor education and schools (Lindsay & Ewert, 1999), it is interesting to note outdoor education has its roots in that very system of education (Miner, 1990).

In a recent work (Bowdridge, 2010), which I will very briefly summarize here, I laid out an argument demonstrating how outdoor education can be thought of separately as both a method and as content in the context of public education. Furthermore, I proposed that this relationship between pedagogy and curriculum, and the corresponding failure to recognize that they are potentially separable, creates difficulty in the incorporation of outdoor education into public schools. For example, individual teachers have more direct control over outdoor education as pedagogy, such as in integrated outdoor programs, rather than as school-board-level designed curriculum, and this creates a natural chronology of staged implementation to consider.

If we are to critically examine *how* outdoor education operates in public schools, then a distinction needs to be made as to the purpose of utilizing this field of education: Is it methodological or is it centred on content? The reason suggested for this clarification is that by each approach, the use (and limitation) of outdoor education can be framed differently based on the program objectives. Programs may attempt to blend both uses of outdoor education in practice, but it is important to identify *when* the *how* of practice is changing.

In this work I presented research data profiling seven Canadian outdoor integrated programs operating in public schools through a qualitative study of 11 veteran teachers. These programs represent some of the longest and most successful integrated programs currently operating in Canada. From this study, key points are drawn out and collated from the various research participants. A review of the responses found that teachers viewed the success of their programs as contributing to many aspects of a student's school experience. The idea that programs reinforced academics articulated a belief that such outdoor education programs provide students with more than simply a wilderness experience, and that significant growth in school-based performance abilities was possible to achieve in such a setting. This coincided with statements that demonstrated the methodological success of their programs being founded in





experiential learning opportunities. As such, most viewed their programs as providing more than just academics. The importance of developing personal growth in their students was apparent.

It was interesting to note how often these teachers spoke of personal growth, considering the context of most high schools being largely academic. This shift to a holistic understanding of student performance allows integrated outdoor programs to bring something greater to the traditional and established high-school system. Yet at the same time it is very important to consider that it may provide a barrier for implementation if such holistic learning and growth is not valued by a school system focusing on content assimilation.

A key point that did arise from the teachers' feedback was how they viewed outdoor education as an approach to teaching, that is to say as pedagogy, rather than a specific and defined curriculum with its own set of outcomes. Here, the emphasis on personal growth and the teaching approach were considered paramount for such programs, and reinforces the notion that those operating such programs do indeed have this tacit understanding of outdoor education as pedagogy.

However, this is not to suggest that these teachers did not see the potential for outdoor education to serve as curriculum. All the participating teachers in this study spoke in terms of curriculum outcomes and linkages to their programs—the very nature of being able to provide an integrated program that utilizes outdoor education as a thematic learning style. Here we can start to see how these teachers transform the educational medium of outdoor education to provide a context for existing school-based curriculum, while utilizing experiential education to provide retention and transference of such learned moments.

Yet, by using outdoor education in such a thematic way, the teachers also indicated that additional core topics to their programs did develop that were outside the required course outcomes they that modeled their programs to cover. It is interesting to note that a generalized *body of knowledge* has been suggested for outdoor education (Bucknell & Mannion, 2006), and includes the topics of knowledge construction, outdoor environments, living and travelling in outdoor environments and ecological sustainability. However, again the emphasis of outdoor education as method over content for these teachers became clear in most conversations.

The data collected and analyzed for this research correlated well with the existing literature, particularly pertaining to the inclusion of outdoor education in the realm of public schooling (Ives & Obenchain, 2006; Coleman, 1995). Similarities existed with other integrated programs, examined in additional studies (Comishin et al., 2004; Horwood, 2002; Russell & Burton, 2000), which critically placed the role of outdoor education as pedagogy, even if not explicitly stated as such. The role of outdoor education as a holistic approach for the development of personal and group skills became apparent, and perhaps differs in emphasis from a school-board content-based environmental education program (that may or may not utilize experiential education practices).

This also suggested a fundamental difference between public school programs and that of the outdoor industry, which relies on the profession simultaneously as both method and content. This primary research benefits such an argument in that it critically examines where public school teachers place their emphasis for such an approach. Although specific outdoor curricular outcomes can be present in even integrated outdoor programs, through the use of specialty courses such as co-op or interdisciplinary studies, the lack of emphasis placed on this throughout the teachers' discussion in this research provides a solid indication of how they place outdoor content beneath that of outdoor practice.

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